
ENGL 3404 - 001: Studies in Popular Texts “Epistolary Fiction”

Instructor.	Dr. Darryl P. Domingo	Office Hrs.	Tues. / Thurs. 8:40 – 9:40
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Office.	Patterson Hall 407	Session.	Aug. 24 – Dec. 10, 2020

Course Description. At a critical moment in *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), Samuel Richardson’s eponymous heroine and principal narrator explains in a long letter to her parents that her situation “surely would furnish out a surprizing kind of Novel, if it was to be well told.” Pamela’s words turned out to be prescient, as her letters helped to establish *epistolary fiction* as both one of the most popular and most durable of literary genres. The epistolary novel is a work of prose fiction whose plot is entirely developed through correspondence, whether through an exchange of letters between multiple characters or through the journal entries, diary jottings, or personal recollections of only one character. This section of “Studies in Popular Texts” will survey the novel in letters over approximately 350 years, inviting students to examine the origins of the genre in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the revival and proliferation of epistolary forms in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Students will read a work of amatory fiction, a sentimental novel, a bawdy parody, a gothic thriller, an exchange between an experienced devil and his apprentice, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, a graphic novel in postcards, a “progressively lipogrammatic epistolary fable,” and a post-modern digest of inter-office e-mails, all in an attempt to understand why letters continue to appeal to authors who wish to tell a good story and to audiences who wish to read one.

Required Reading. Aphra Behn, *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* (PDF Text); Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, eds. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford, 2001 / 9780199536498); Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* and *Shamela*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies, Martin C. Battestin, and Thomas Keymer (Oxford, 2008 / 9780199536986); Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford, 2011 / 9780199564095); C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins, 2001 / 9780060652937); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Harcourt/Harvest, 2003 / 9780156028356); Nick Bantock, *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* (Chronicle Books, 1991 / 9780877017882); Mark Dunn, *Ella Minnow Pea: A Novel in Letters* (Anchor, 2002 / 9780385722438); Rainbow Rowell, *Attachments: A Novel* (Plume/Penguin, 2012 / 978-0452297548).

Matt Beaumont, *e* (Plume/Penguin, 2000 / 9780452281882); Mark Dunn, *Ella Minnow Pea: A Novel in Letters* (Anchor, 2002 / 9780385722438).

Method of Instruction. Lectures, with a strong emphasis on classroom discussion.

Method of Evaluation. Two reading tests (30%), written in class; one 500-word “Epistolary Review” (15%), due at some point prior to the last day of classes; one 1,500-word essay (25%); one two-hour final examination (20%), written during the exam period; informed participation in classroom discussion (10%).

Epistolary Review. Each student will be asked to write a critical review of one of the novels on the course syllabus in a form that imitates one of the modes of correspondence discussed in this course—either in the form of a letter, journal or diary entry, telegram, post-card, e-mail, etc.

Learning Outcomes. Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify basic narrative forms and define literary terms related to the novel as genre.
- Describe the particular conventions of epistolary fiction and explain how and why these conventions appeal to readers.
- Historicize the novel in letters and trace the genre’s development over time.
- Analyze the reciprocal relationship between literary text and cultural context.
- Orally discuss critical issues concerning epistolary fiction, and write about these issues in a clear and coherent manner.
- Employ the conventions of Standard Written English and MLA or Chicago style.